'Devī Needs those Rituals!' Ontological Considerations on Ritual Transformations in a Contemporary South Indian Śrīvidyā Tradition

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ABSTRACT: Negotiations between continuity and discontinuity have characterized Śrīvidyā traditions for centuries; these are primarily studied through texts or the juxtaposition of textual prescriptions with observed practices, leaving the *process* of how Śrīvidyā practitioners negotiate esoteric and orthodox tendencies unexplored. Building on extensive fieldwork among practitioners of a contemporary South Indian Śrīvidyā tradition, I present the dynamics animating such transformations. Focusing on *kalāvāhana*, one of the tradition's central rituals aimed at identifying with Devī, I trace the underlying forces that gradually replace its most esoteric aspects (centred around the body and sexual pleasure) with conventional worship (external or meditative practices), refashioning the tradition as part of mainstream Śāktism. While some practitioners conform to the new canon, others, for whom the changes diminish ritual efficacy, secretly continue embodied practices. Through a Foucauldian archaeologico-genealogical analysis, I investigate which regimes of truth and ontological coordinates allow the ritual to change, and which diminish its efficacy. While at first negotiations between continuity and discontinuity appear driven by socio-political motives, ultimately they are governed and legitimized by fundamentally diverging modes of being. A pre-objectified worldview demands embodied experiences (including unconventional practices invoking pleasure) while a dualistic framework endorses representational practices (such as meditation and idol-worship).

KEYWORDS: Śrīvidyā; Tantra; ritual transformation; Goddess worship; embodiment; ontology.

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INTRODUCTION

The degree to which Śrīvidyā traditions[2] fluctuate between continuity and discontinuity and, in the process, abandon—or relegate to secrecy—elements diverging from mainstream sensibilities, has been discussed across a number of studies. While historical considerations and detailed descriptions have significantly expanded the understanding of change, the ontological coordinates and regimes of truth underlying and legitimizing change have yet to be explored. So far, studies on the topic can broadly be grouped in two categories: those resorting exclusively to textual and visual sources from the past, and those comparing current-day practices with texts authored in earlier epochs.

Among the former, David Gordon White's work (1998) figures prominently. Through an analysis of the evolution of rituals around the *kāmakalā* diagram, White suggests that Śrīvidyā emerged in the twelfth to thirteenth century as a sophisticated development of the erotic *yoginī* cult and Kaula system, which, in turn, emerged from practices directed at Śiva-Bhairava and Kālī. Both the Kaula system and Śrīvidyā foresee that practitioners (*sādhaka*s) channel cosmic energy into the human microcosm and embody the divine; however, while in the Kaula system this identity is obtained through sexual practices, in the sublimated Śrīvidyā tradition adepts invoke divinity merely through meditation techniques revolving around sacred diagrams (*yantra*s) and sounds (*mantra*s).

Among the scholars combining textual and ethnographic methods is Douglas Renfrew Brooks, who analyses contemporary Śrīvidyā practices in light of centuries-old canons (Brooks 1992). The practitioners he worked with are primarily Brahmins claiming descent from the twentieth-century guru Cidānanda. While Cidānanda's teachings favour convention-defying practices, Brooks's informants uphold Brahminical values of purity and limit themselves to orthodox customs. By thus creating a 'Hindu otherness' (ibid.: 428) within the community, practitioners benefit from the ambiguity of neither fully embracing nor rejecting unorthodox practices.[3]

2. Śrīvidyā traditions revolve around the erotic and benevolent goddess Tripurasundarī (beautiful one of the three realms), also called Lalitā, Rājarājeśvarī, or simply Devī. Since Śrīvidyā practices are profoundly shaped by the socio-political and metaphysico-ontological contexts in which they unfold, I refer to Śrīvidyā traditions in the plural, as opposed to assuming one authentic, original source, of which varying exegeses are merely deviations. Underlying this approach is a critical stance toward the very concept of origin, as suggested by Foucault (1984) in his elaborations on Nietzsche.

3. For text-based studies on Śrīvidyā see also Golovkova (2019, 2020), Padoux (1990), Gupta, Hoens and Goudriaan (1979) and Weber (2010), while Harper and Brown (2002) present essays almost exclusively based on textual or visual sources. For discussions on Tantric traditions in general, see Sanderson (2007, 2009, 2012–13) and Urban (2003, 2009) for how these traditions have been perceived across time, and Khanna (1980) for an illustrated study

While both approaches contribute substantially to appreciating how Śrīvidyā adepts have for centuries negotiated continuity and discontinuity, I propose to complement such studies with an examination of the ontological underpinnings that firstly enable change, and secondly endow it with legitimacy. My anthropological work with Śrīvidyā practitioners suggests not only that ritual transformations are complex and never definitive, but also that, while they can readily be embraced by some *sādhaka*s, others reject them, at the cost of secretly engaging in banned practices or abandoning the community. Underlying this rejection is, on the one hand, the practitioners' own disapproval of ritual changes, and on the other, Devī's dissatisfaction with them.[4]

Applying a Foucauldian archaeologico-genealogical methodology[5] that investigates discursive processes underlying regimes of existence and truth, I inquire which modes of being and worldviews allow for the ritual corpus to change, and according to which existential coordinates such transformations entail loss of efficacy. Similarly, I ask which metaphysical prerequisites determine Devī's gratification in light of modified practices.

In order to investigate these questions, I focus on *kalāvāhana*, a ritual central to the *sādhanā* (ritual practice) of the practitioners I lived with, which has undergone significant changes in recent years. From being a decidedly esoteric ritual revolving around the body and pleasure, it has been refashioned so that it can be accommodated within mainstream *śākta* traditions. While in *kalāvāhana* the conflicting forces underlying the dialectic between continuity and discontinuity emerge most prominently, similar negotiations affect the tradition at large. A detailed ethnographic account of *kalāvāhana* (pp. XXX) thus provides a template to understand the wider motives underlying the reconfiguration of this Śrīvidyā tradition. I argue that what at first appears a mediation between continuity (secured by maintaining esoteric

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of the *yantra*, Only a few works build on a combination of sources and methods: with regard to Śrīvidyā, Padoux (1998) and Brooks (1990) accompany textual analyses with historical and ethnographic methods. For Hindu Tantric traditions in general, see McDaniel (2004, 2012) and Rosati (2016). Finally, see Rao (2019), Kumar (2015) and Dempsey (2006) for an anthropological approach to Śrīvidyā.

4. Throughout the study, my intent is to relay information about Devī and ritual experience as closely as possible to how *sādhaka*s themselves introduced these to me. Without professing any judgment on the efficacy of rituals or on Devī's satisfaction, presenting *sādhaka*s' views at face value is an ethical choice that not only avoids the pretence of secular and/or scientific objectivity on the researcher's part, but also favours an approach to the dynamics determining ritual efficacy from within the world as it is worlded in Śaktipur.

5. Foucault's archaeological and genealogical methodologies overlap, the latter building on the former. While the archaeological methodology assesses discursive structures and conditions of truth, the genealogical methodology analyses the power-dynamics underlying such structures, and their manifestation through bodies and behaviours (Foucault 1972; Gutting 2005: 32–53).

traits) and popularity (obtained by adopting mainstream characteristics) is, ultimately, a contention between fundamentally diverging worldviews and modes of being: one dominated by embodied ontological coordinates, and the other by representational modes of being (pp. XXX). Before presenting the ethnographic material and delving into its analysis, however, an illustration of the multi-layered nature of change, and the praxis-based approach that enabled me to discern its complexities, is due (pp. XXX).

THE IMPERMANENT NATURE OF RITUAL TRANSFORMATIONS AND THE CASE FOR A PRAXIS-BASED METHODOLOGY

> Privately a Śākta, outwardly a Śaiva, among people a Vaiṣṇava.[6]
> (*Yonitantra* 4.20, quoted in Schoterman 1980: 58)

Unlike the majority of scholarly works on Tantric traditions, the present study is purely based on praxis. The data underlying my argument stem from a period of immersive fieldwork conducted in the South Indian temple complex Śaktipur,[7] primarily between 2017 and 2018, although my connection with the temple began in 2014 and extends till the present. While my reasons for committing to observant participation, as opposed to participant observation, were primarily ethical, over time the far-reaching implications of this choice unfolded to their full extent.[8] Firstly, as a fellow-initiate engaged in *pūjā*s (worship), I formed an understanding of the tradition developing from embodied knowledge and lived experiences shared with my informants.[9] Secondly, as my position gradually shifted from curious outsider

6. This often-cited aphorism indicates the layered and malleable nature of ritual practices among Goddess worshippers, allowing them to adapt to different social expectations.
7. Śaktipur was built from the mid-1980s when its founder and guru started having visions of Devī requesting a house. After land in a rural area near the southeastern coast was donated, the temple's construction began, with its consecration taking place in 1994. On a daily basis, the temple complex attracts primarily the rural local population; urban and middle-class worshippers generally come on weekends. On special festivals, the temple attracts devotees from various parts of the country and abroad.
8. Although shaping my understanding of the tradition, my personal experiences are not the object of analysis. In stating my involvement, I do not pretend to eliminate potential biases, but provide sufficient information to reflexively account for them. Since my approach is influenced by the ontological turn (Clammer, Poirier and Schwimmer 2004; Paleček and Risjord 2013; Ingold 2000), I refer to Devī, Gurujī and lived experiences as far as possible in the way they are perceived in the world of Śaktipur. While being initiated into the tradition, my role as a researcher has always been overt.
9. My primary informants are about a dozen practitioners, most of them living at, or regularly visiting, the temple; out of these, four to six are especially close to me, be it as teachers or friends. The total number of informants, however, is close to eighty. Between fifteen and twenty-five people live on site; the number varies based on the priest/esses' and

to Śrīvidyā student engaged in the community, the significance of the above aphorism became distinctly relatable, and I could appreciate how the politics of secrecy it alludes to chiefly inform the tradition's narratives of continuity and discontinuity.

Crucially, my main fieldwork took place during a period of major structural changes, as a few months previously the guru of the temple complex, lovingly called Gurujī, left his physical body. The vacuum ensuing from this loss has exposed Śaktipur to enduring renegotiations in the echelons of leadership and revisions of the official body of rituals, leading to some practices becoming illegitimate and others being transformed to various degrees. However, it is the *sādhaka*s who ultimately determine which of the forbidden rituals are indeed abandoned, and which are perpetuated in secrecy through 'everyday forms of resistance' (Scott 1989) alongside the sanctioned corpus.

Contrary to works suggesting an overall linear evolution, whereby esoteric traditions over time acquire increasingly mainstream traits, my fieldwork reveals an ambiguous and flexible, oftentimes messy, coexistence of non-conventional and orthodox practices within the same tradition. The negotiation between contrasting practices, while not reflected in a tradition's official stance, constitutes an important component to access not only non-sanctioned narratives but also the profound motives informing different ramifications within the same canon.

My informants explain that there are four paths within Śrīvidyā, each with a corresponding set of practices. These consist of: *samayācāra* (internal worship through the mind), *dakṣiṇācāra* (worship of external representations of Devī with 'pure' substances such as flowers and incense), *kaulācāra* (worship of Devī as human being), and *vāmācāra* (worship of Devī's fierce aspects through 'impure' substances).[10] While each path is equally valid, and usually Devī decides which course a devotee undertakes, followers of all paths commonly admit that the last two, while more dangerous, are faster and more efficacious in pleasing Devī. Particularly the practices foreseen in these latter paths, entailing 'forbidden' elements, are called Tantric by the *sādhaka*s I lived with (Fig. 1). The quadripartite outlook, whereby all paths legitimately coexist, was reflected in Gurujī's teachings, tailored according to his followers' predispositions. While to be a Śrīvidyā practitioner thus

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administrators' commitments away from the temple complex and the number of labourers present from time to time. Daily visitors vary from around hundred on a regular day, up to almost two thousand on important festivals. Due to the varied background of the devotees, many interactions could be held in English, whereas for complex conversations with non-English speakers, I worked with a translator.

10. This contrasts with the division into left-hand (*vāma*) and right-hand (*dakṣiṇa*) paths, suggested by Flood (1996) and Goudriaan (1979). According to Dempsey there is a tripartite division of worship within Śrīvidyā: 'through the body in ritual activity, through speech while chanting, and through the mind in meditation' (Dempsey 2006: 53).
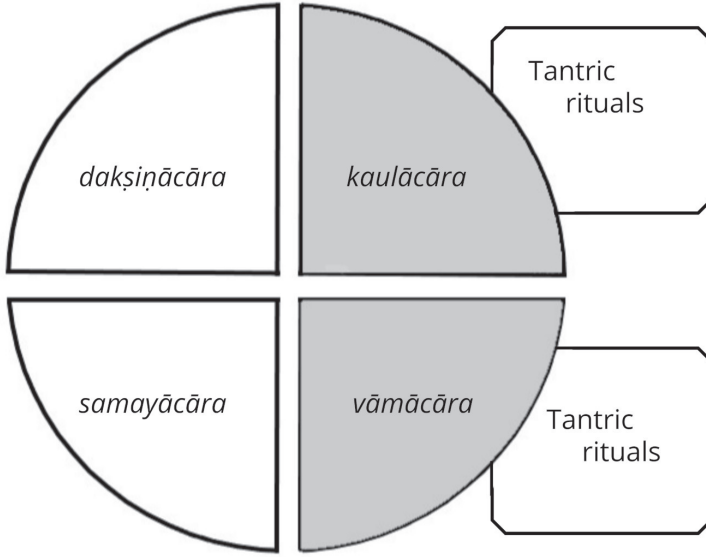
Figure 1: Paths within Śrīvidyā.

means different things to different people, and entails diverse ritual execu-
tions, all *sādhaka*s resort to the same basic instruction manuals for their prac-
tices, making text an inadequate source to illustrate a tradition in its lived
expression.

Just as the temple complex and the ritual corpus as a whole present
various coexisting practices, similar concurrences exist at the micro-level
of individual *sādhaka*s, who often follow a combination of approaches. For
example, those engaging in *kaulācāra* practices, for pragmatic reasons also
regularly perform *dakṣiṇācāra* rituals. *Vāmācāra* practices, on the other hand,
replace other types of worship only temporarily, as they are performed only
in extreme circumstances, if at all.[11] While adepts performing Tantric prac-
tices also perform conventional rituals, the opposite is not necessarily true,
with several devotees opting solely for *samayācāra* and *dakṣiṇācāra* methods.
Nevertheless, apart from few yet influential exceptions, in Śaktipur adepts
(of any caste) who refrain from Tantric practices express respect and awe
for the esoteric paths.[12] Preferences for types of ritual practices may also
vary over the course of a *sādhaka*'s spiritual journey. Age can determine a

11. These are situations of particular distress where Devī has to intervene promptly and
     resolutely. As a means to pursue liberation, Gurujī favoured the worship of Tripurasundarī
     in her loving guise.
12. Brooks, on the other hand, recounts that among the community he worked with 'being
     called a "Tantric" is anything but a compliment' (Brooks 1992: 407).

shift from bodily-oriented practices to meditative visualisations. Another deciding factor is the scarcity of partners with whom to conduct *kaulācāra* practices, lamented by several informants; marriage, in this case, can affect a change in path, if both spouses subscribe to Tantric practices.

Finally, a temple complex as a whole may, over time, promote (at least outwardly) different ritual paths in view of the administration's, senior priest/esses', or guru's preferences, all having to be carefully and continuously negotiated with external forces (such as changing political climates) and internal demands (such as the adepts' predispositions and the benefactors' satisfaction).

When adopting a praxis-oriented lens, it becomes evident that a view of Śrīvidyā, and especially its relation to continuity and discontinuity, remains problematic if the micro-dynamics animating different levels of a tradition at any given time are neglected. Moreover, an approach rooted in practice reflects the majority of my teachers', friends' and informants' inclination toward *being* through *doing*, rather than understanding through studying or interviewing, as the gentle reprimand of one of my primary teachers in response to my questions shows:

> With experience you will get to know ... Go back [to your room] and meditate. Knowledge only comes like this. Nowadays we just want to know immediately—instead we should find out through practice. There are translations [of sacred texts] for foreigners who keep asking [for explanations]. [But] it is not usual to question the guru. Even I don't know all the meanings of the *Lalitā Sahasranāma*[13] ... but its benefits are there.

By actively engaging in rituals and consciously avoiding exegetical texts, I hope that my apperception of Śrīvidyā reflects closely that of my informants, whose expertise primarily stems from repeated ritual practice and *satsang*s (congregations around gurus or knowledgeable *sādhaka*s) rather than scriptures.

EVOKING THE INHERENT ONENESS WITH DEVĪ THROUGH THE *KALĀVĀHANA* RITUAL

> The desire for peace, the serenity of compromise, and the tacit acceptance of the law, far from representing a major moral conversion ... that gave rise to the law, are but its result and, in point of fact, its perversion ... Humanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity ... humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination.
>
> (Foucault 1984: 85)

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13. A text consisting of Devī's thousand names, regularly chanted as part of one's *sādhanā*.

Following a preliminary exposition of the nuances of change, in this section I illustrate the *kalāvāhana* ritual as the basis for an analysis of the ontological motives informing ritual transformations and their conditions of legitimacy. Having undergone significant changes during my fieldwork, *kalāvāhana* allows for an inquiry into the contrasting conditions underlying, on the one side, its propensity for discontinuity, and on the other, its inclination to continuity.

As Foucault (1984) suggests, a vision of history that proceeds in linear fashion toward an end representing the culmination of progress dismisses the often-violent battles and discontinuities informing the present:

> The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history ... as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled ... history becomes 'effective' to the degree that it introduces discontinuity ... uproot[s] its traditional foundations and relentlessly disrupt[s] its pretended continuity.
>
> (Foucault 1984: 88).

When adopting 'effective' history, *kalāvāhana* becomes the site where conflicting interested forces meet. Since in particular its esoteric and conventional features are mediated, *kalāvāhana* can be understood as a watershed reflecting negotiations between the *kaulācāra* and *dakṣiṇācāra* tendencies of the tradition at large.

Metaphysical Underpinnings of *Kalāvāhana*: The Fundamental Identity between Devī, *Sādhakas* and the Śrīcakra

> This *pūjā* opens the benefits of Śrīcakra *pūjā* to you. It is very powerful, but has been kept very secret so far. Doing *pūjā* every day connects you to Goddess, solves your life's problems, and makes you a delightful, wealthy and an excellent all around person radiating the glory of divine love towards all.
>
> (Saraswati 2016: 8)

Kalāvāhana is to my knowledge a ritual unique to Gurujī's disciples, hitherto undocumented in scholarly literature. It originated when Devī transmitted it to Gurujī as an abbreviated version of *navāvaraṇa pūjā*,[14] to be performed on *sādhakas'* bodies, as opposed to the Śrīcakra. As one of the current administrators of the temple said, '*kalāvāhana* was one of Gurujī's favourite [rituals]. That was his *highlight*!' Like in *navāvaraṇa*, in *kalāvāhana* practitioners invoke Devī's retinue of gods and goddesses, worship her and her deities through copious offerings and, having pleased them, take Devī's blessings in return. Crucially, since the Śrīcakra is Devī in diagrammatic form,[15] when the body

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14. *Navāvaraṇa pūjā* is the worship of Devī in her diagrammatic form as Śrīcakra. The *pūjā* is described in Chapter 5 of the *Paraśurāma-Kalpasūtra* (see Weber 2010 for a comprehensive overview of the text, and Wilke 2012 for the text's positioning at the intersection of orthodoxy and heterodoxy).

15. See Khanna (2016) for a detailed overview of the Śrīcakra.

of practitioners functions as the *yantra* (diagram generally associated with mystic sounds or *mantra*s) to be venerated, a homology with Devī underwrites the entire ritual.[16] Indeed, one of the primary aims of *kalāvāhana* is to awaken Devī in the recipients of the ritual and establish their divine identity, either for purely soteriological reasons (to obtain *mokṣa*, liberation) or in order to influence the mundane world—be it by obtaining Devī's boons, or by directly accessing and participating in her powers.

While both identity with Devī and partaking in her powers are ultimate goals pursued by practitioners, these are also the pervasive, essential conditions (often unacknowledged) of everything existing. Consequently, *kalāvāhana* can be received independently of one's gender and caste. The same extends to *kalāvāhana* performers and priesthood generally: as long as one is part of Gurujī's lineage, and has the necessary knowledge and appropriate intentions, neither caste nor gender is a hindrance. Although I noticed a prevalence of women, male *sādhaka*s constitute roughly one third of *kalāvāhana* receivers and of ritual specialists.

Since *kalāvāhana* builds on an understanding of the body as *yantra*, a system of enclosures (*āvaraṇa*s or *cakra*s) analogous to that informing the Śrīcakra traverses the body—the only difference being that, while the Śrīcakra presents nine enclosures, the human body has seven. Excluding the two outermost levels of the Śrīcakra, a direct correspondence between *sādhaka*s' bodies, the Śrīcakra and—the Śrīcakra being Devī—Devī's body emerges, which underpins the ritual's rationale (Figs 2–5). This system of correlations appears clearly through the *cakra*s, energy knots located along the spinal column and the head: starting from the coccyx area up to the crown of the head, Devī's and *sādhaka*s' bodies display seven *cakra*s which inform, and are informed by, the seven upper levels of the Śrīcakra (Fig. 4). Each *cakra* presents a specific colour, shape, element, number of petals, *bīja* (seed *mantra*) and presiding deity, which characterize the respective portions of the Śrīcakra and of Devī's and *sādhaka*s' bodies (Fig. 5).[17]

As emerges from a conversation between a male ritual receiver and Lavanya, one of the temple's most active priestesses, by unblocking the *cakra*s, *kalāvāhana* facilitates the free flow of divine energy through receivers' bodies and, ultimately, their identity with Devī and access to her boons and power. The priestess explains this mechanism by comparing a person whose energy has not yet been awakened to a lifeless statue; just as through

16. The installation of the Śrīcakra onto *sādhaka*s' bodies and the realisation of practitioners' identity with Devī are also described in the *Yoginīhṛdaya* (Padoux and Roger-Orphé 2013; Golovkova 2019). Despite evident philosophical parallels, the Sanskrit text primarily prescribes meditations and visualizations, eschewing sexual rites, which on the other hand play a fundamental role in *kalāvāhana* as transmitted by Gurujī.

17. Khanna (2004) provides a good overview of such a conceptualisation of the body; see also Böhler (2011), Timalsina (2012), Flood (2006: 146–70) and Samuel (2008).

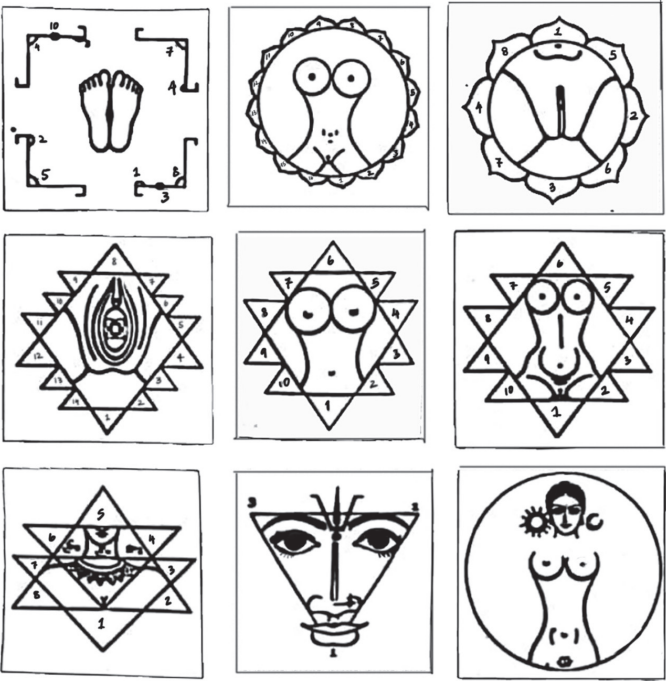**Figure 2:** Śrīcakra. Source: Saraswati (2001: 59).

Figure 3: Superimpositions between Śrīcakra enclosures, Devī and *cakras* (from top left to right). Source: image based on Saraswati (2001: 43–53).
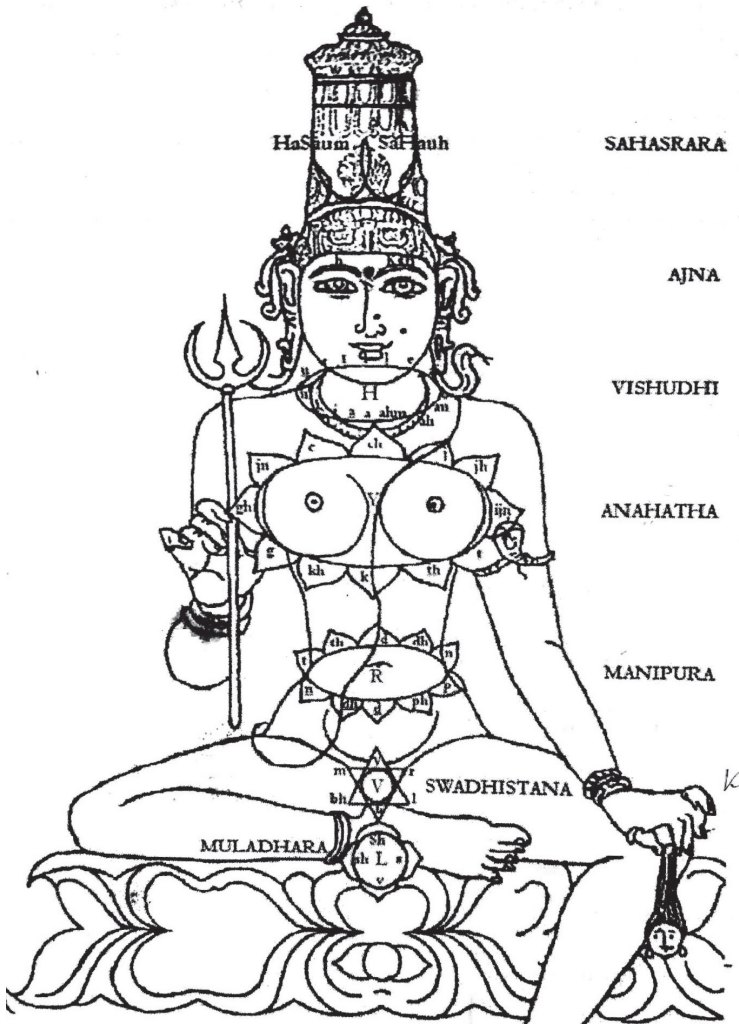
Figure 4: *Cakras* along the body. Source: Saraswati (2016: 7).

mantric invocations a statue is transformed into an idol to be venerated (in the consecration ritual *prāṇa pratiṣṭhā* 'establishment of life-breath'), through *kalāvāhana* a person becomes divine:

> L.: No matter how beautiful a statue looks, do we or do we not fold our hands and say *namaskāram* [lit. adoration, used as greeting] to it?
>
> Receiver: No, not to a statue.
>
> L.: If we [invoke Devī] in that very statue in a temple, we pray to it. Why do we pray to it now, and why didn't we previously? ... There is something added to its nature without us knowing. When this happens, we automatically fold our

hands and pray to it … Now imagine if we did that much work on ourselves … There are *cakra*s within us … if we purify the *cakra*s within us, what heights will we reach? When we do *kalāvāhana*, we call the Goddess to enter our body and purify each *cakra*, just how a [statue] is purified. There are *mantra*s for each *cakra*, and the *cakra*s are purified. When purified, the blockages … get opened.

Within the cosmological framework of my teachers and informants, physical bodies thus emerge primarily as manifestations of a subtle network of deities, energies and sounds, and *kalāvāhana* is the means through which to re-establish the ultimate subtle essence of worldly bodies.[18]

Execution of *Kalāvāhana*: The Process of Establishing Oneness with Devī

While Devī is all-pervasive, the awakening and free flow of her energy and the acknowledgment of ultimate oneness with her require a sophisticated process. *Kalāvāhana* combines the chanting of *mantra*s and deities' names with the touching of the petals of the body's *cakra*s, where the respective deities reside (Fig. 4).[19] In such a fashion, divine rays are invoked in the receiver (*kalā* rendered as 'ray' by *sādhaka*s, *āvāhana* 'invitation'), before worshipping the deities. The ritual is performed inside Kāmākhyā, a dark and intimate shrine, about four metres square, representing Devī's womb. Considered a locus of primordial origin, it houses an almost three-metre-long *yoni* (vulva) surmounted by a *liṅga* (penis), on which the ritual recipient sits while being worshipped.

Lasting between twenty and forty minutes (depending on the speed at which *mantra*s are chanted), *kalāvāhana* consists of three phases: inviting Devī's retinue of gods and goddesses in the ritual receiver's body, infusing the receiver's body with Devī's energy, and worshipping the receiver (now Devī) through a bath and other offerings.

Firstly, having chanted the *guru mantra* to obtain Gurujī's guidance and protection in case of mistakes, 'the body is made the receptor of the divine light of Lalitā … [who is] love of life, enjoyment and beauty, protecting … against all evil, attracting all wealth, health and happiness' (Saraswati 2016: 8). In this phase, the petals of each *cakra* are gently touched on the body of the receiver, while chanting their respective *bīja mantra*s in conjunction with the qualities (or rays) of Agni, Sūrya and Candra first, and of Brahmā,

18. I elaborate on the coordinates of existentiality underpinning Śrīvidyā cosmology in my PhD thesis. For the purpose of this article, suffice it to keep in mind that for my informants grossness is a palimpsest that necessarily bears traces of the subtle, with the subtle at the same time preceding and exceeding the manifest.

19. As mentioned above, while Devī and the Śrīcakra have nine *cakra*s, as shown in Figs 2 and 3, the human body has only seven. The human body's *cakra*s overlap with those of Devī, with the exception of her feet and thigh *cakra*s. In Fig. 3, the first two enclosures from the left in the first row are the ones pertaining exclusively to Devī and the Śrīcakra.

Viṣṇu, Rudra, Īśvara and Sadāśiva later. Having thus prepared the body, the deities themselves are invited through mantric sounds and by touching the *cakra*s where they reside: Agni in Ājñā, Sūrya in Anāhata, Soma in Sahasrāra, Brahmā in Mūlādhāra, Viṣṇu in Svādhiṣṭhāna, Rudra in Maṇipūra, Īśvara in Anāhata and Sadāśiva in Viśuddha (Fig. 5).[20] Then, Devī's rays are welcomed in Ājñā, followed by Śiva and Śakti's rays in the right and left sides of the head respectively. Rays and *amṛta*, the nectar of immortality deriving from the union of Śakti and Śiva, then descend from the crown of the head to the eyes, before Śakti's rays, or energies—*icchā* (will), *jñāna* (knowledge) and *kriyā* (action), associated with the goddesses Sarasvatī, Lakṣmī and Pārvatī—are invoked in the mouth, heart and *yoni*[21] of the receiver, whereas in the feet *mokṣa* (liberation) and *bhoga* (enjoyment) are called upon. As Rajeswariamma, one of Gurujī's most senior disciples, observes, 'if you visualize the *cakra*s in *kalāvāhana* … [y]ou will become Devī, you are Devī … Her feet are your feet, her thighs are your thighs, her Mūlādhāra is yours, and so on'. After once more reciting the *guru mantra*, the first phase of the ritual concludes with an appeal to the Mahāvākyas, Great Sayings, proclaiming unity between the individual and the Supreme, and the touching of all *cakra*s from the lowest to the topmost while offering everything to Devī.[22]

The second part of *kalāvāhana* consists in infusing the ritual receiver with Devī's energy. Holding a flower with the right thumb, middle and ring fingers (hand in *mṛgī mudrā*) against their heart, the ritual performer exhales Devī from the heart into the flower with the help of *mantra*s. The energized flower is then arranged in the lap of the person worshipped. Successively, Devī's power is infused directly into the receiver: with their right hand on the receiver's heart in *mṛgī mudrā*, their left either pointing skywards or resting on their own head, the ritual performer consecrates the receiver by inviting Devī into them with appropriate *mantra*s (*prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*). This is a delicate process, since it requires the ritual performer to channel Devī's energy through the power of their own heart, which can entail a considerable power imbalance on the part of the performer. Lavanya explains that just like a switch and a lightbulb need a wire acting as vehicle to transport energy, in *kalāvāhana* the performer is required to transfer cosmic energy from one location to another. Furthermore, Lavanya observes, 'like a wire gets worn out just by transferring energy from a switch to a bulb over time,

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20. Some of the *cakra*s house more than one deity.
21. The *yoni*, even though it is the female sexual organ, is attributed to both female and male ritual receivers, due to the ultimate feminine essence of everything existing. I elaborate on the ultimate feminine nature of existence in detail in my thesis (Chapter 4).
22. Many of the deities invoked are male, even though ultimately the ritual receiver is identified with Devī. While this may appear contradictory, it falls within the purview of the precept that the ultimate essence of everything existing and conceivable is necessarily Devī and female.

we also get worn out with time, even though it is not our own energy that we transmit'. Consequently, it is suggested that the performer wash their feet after the *pūjā* in order to get rid of weakness.[23] This phase concludes with the *āvāhanamudrā*s, a set of ten powerful and guarded hand gestures inviting and persuading Devī to be pleased and grant wishes.

In the third phase the receiver, now Devī, is worshipped. The highlight of this portion is a lengthy bath (*abhiṣeka*), whereby abundant warm water perfumed with sandalwood, turmeric, rosewater and other spices is poured, through a small copper vessel, all over the receiver's body, to the sound of *mantra*s. This generally lasts between ten and twenty minutes, again depending on the speed at which the *mantra*s are recited. First, the now divine receiver is worshipped as Śakti, through the recitation of the *Khaḍgamālā* (*Garland of the Sword*), a *stotra* (hymn of praise) venerating each of the hundred-and-eight goddesses residing in specific places of the Śrīcakra and of the body. These goddesses are like swords protecting the *sādhaka*s. Thereafter, the divine receiver is worshipped as Śiva, through the chanting of the guru *nāmāvali* (list of names), each accompanied by due *mantra*s: first, the five elements are honoured in their respective *cakra*s; this is followed by worshipping the lights, before revering the *yoginī*s (female spiritual teachers) in the nine levels of the Śrīcakra and of the body; then, the thirty-six *tattva*s, essences, of the guru are honoured in the body, followed by the worship of the Mahāvākyas, the guru *maṇḍala*s (diagrams or *cakra*s), the *navagraha*s (the nine planets), the eight *lokapāla*s (guardians of the directions), and the *sampradāya*s (spiritual lineages).

By the time the receiver has thus been worshipped as Śakti and Śiva in their various names and forms, and three or four large buckets of water have been poured over them, the *pūjā* nears its end. Red *kuṃkumā* (powder obtained from turmeric) and sandalwood are smeared on the receptor's forehead, feet and hands, while their hair is adorned with flowers, before they are offered a succinct *pañca upacāra pūjā* (ritual of five offerings) with *gandham* (perfumed sandalwood paste, associated with the Mūlādhāra as it is the site of smell), *puṣpa* (flowers, associated with Viśuddha, the *cakra* related to space), *dhūpa* (incense, offered in Anāhata, the *cakra* linked with air), *dīpa* (light, offered in Maṇipūra, site of fire) and *naivedya* (food, associated with Svādhiṣṭhāna, site of water) (Fig. 5). Finally, the powerful *daśamudrā*s, hand gestures signifying the worship of Devī, are shown to the receiver who, at this point, is expected to bless the *kalāvāhana* performer. This ensures that the energy that has been

23. Similarly, in order to counter the outpouring of energy, some performers favour pointing their left hand away from their own body, as opposed to resting it on their head, during *prāṇa pratiṣṭhā*. The loss of energy can also be reduced by attributing the task of chanting *mantra*s to one person and the touching of *cakra*s on the receptor's body to another. This division is often also applied when one of the performers has not yet mastered the *mantra*s, or when multiple people are receiving the *pūjā* simultaneously.
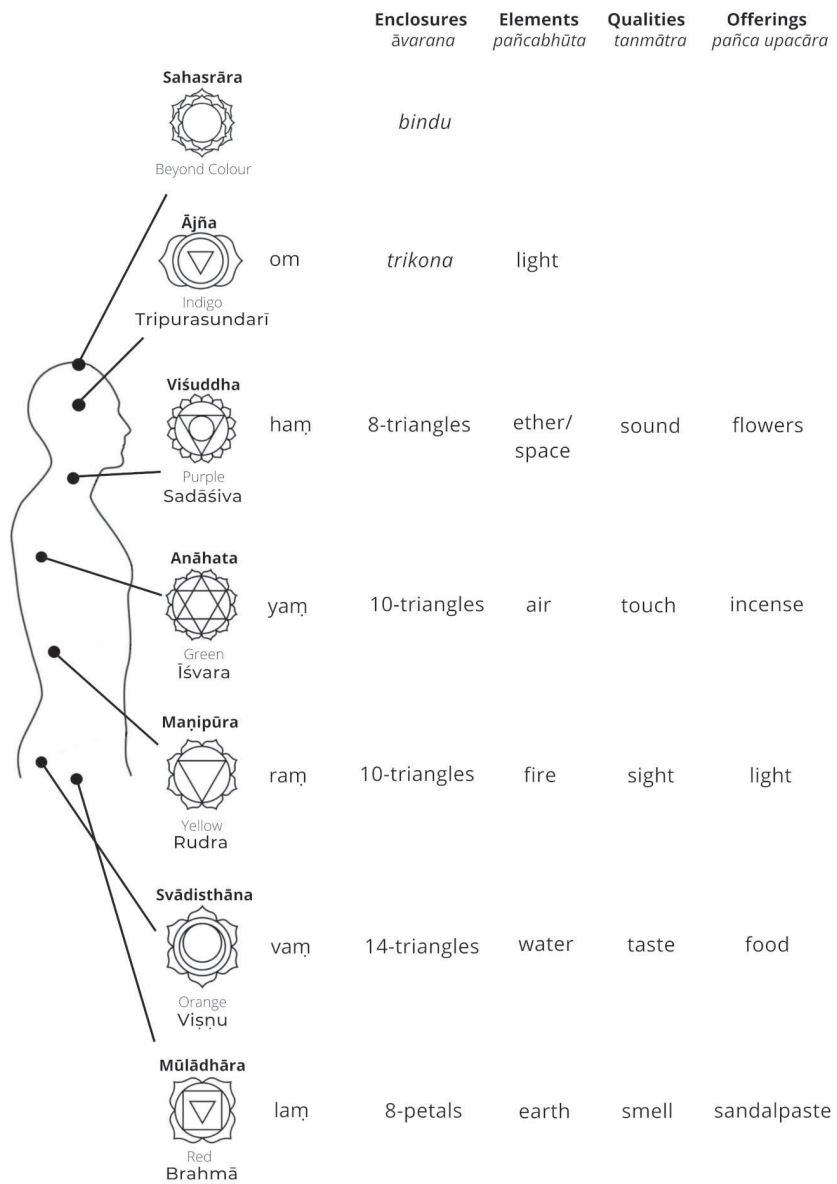
	Enclosures āvarana	Elements pañcabhūta	Qualities tanmātra	Offerings pañca upacāra
Sahasrāra _(Beyond Colour)_	bindu			
Ājña _Indigo_ **Tripurasundarī**	om	trikona	light	
Viśuddha _Purple_ **Sadāśiva**	ham	8-triangles	ether/space	sound	flowers
Anāhata _Green_ **Īśvara**	yam	10-triangles	air	touch	incense
Maṇipūra _Yellow_ **Rudra**	ram	10-triangles	fire	sight	light
Svādisthāna _Orange_ **Viṣṇu**	vam	14-triangles	water	taste	food
Mūlādhāra _Red_ **Brahmā**	lam	8-petals	earth	smell	sandalpaste

Figure 5: Subtle body.

manifested through the ritual specialist, and successively magnified during *pūjā*, is accessible to the performer too.[24]

24. The practice of assimilating the power generated in ritual is common to all rituals performed by the practitioners I worked with. While the sharing of the energy or divine

The Transformation of *Kalāvāhana*: From Transgressive to Increasingly Conventional Practice

In recent years, but especially since Gurujī left his physical body, Śaktipur's ritual corpus has undergone profound adjustments, which have seen it increasingly abide by mainstream sensibilities, notably regarding propriety and purity.[25] *Kalāvāhana*, in particular, has seen a number of restrictions, since it is a site where conventional and transgressive attitudes converge. With its person-centric as opposed to idol-centric worship, it constitutes the primary threshold to practices entailing the *pañca makāra*s, 'five Ms'—five offerings whose Sanskrit names begin with *m*: *madya* (wine), *māṃsa* (meat), *matsya* (fish), *mudrā* (parched grain) and especially *maithuna* (sexual intercourse).

While the gradual sanitization of *kalāvāhana* reflected in the official stance of the temple complex had already been underway before my connection with this tradition, changes in the ritual and in Kāmākhyā were distinctly noticeable during my fieldwork. The ritual revisions constituted points of major contention between practitioners, who renegotiated their alliances among themselves and vis-à-vis the temple—in the most drastic cases abandoning it and establishing their own *pīṭha* ('seat' of a deity, shrine). Narratives of dissent and of overt and covert strategies of resistance in fact became one of the leitmotifs of my stay.[26]

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boons at the end of a ritual is common across Hindu traditions (usually by sharing *prasād* 'sanctified food or other offering' among worshippers), my informants are distinctly aware of the fundamental role they play in producing this energy in the first place.

25. While the temple's official stance outspokenly rejects caste and gender barriers, it is aligned with mainstream Brahminical values in prohibiting the consumption of non-vegetarian food and alcohol. Propriety-wise, sexual activity is to be confined within the boundaries of heterosexual marriage and nudity is regulated by a narrative of shame. While it is not possible to discuss the link between South Asian and Western norms of propriety in this space, it is worth mentioning that the temple increasingly promotes ideals diffused from the seventeenth century onwards in Europe and reinforced in the Victorian period, when British values were most influential in its colonies (see Urban 1999 for an idea of the influence of Victorian values in India).

26. In part, this was directly due to my stay falling in a period of changes, which profoundly impacted *sādhaka*s desiring to uphold the practices Gurujī taught them. Further, my role as fellow-practitioner—appreciative of the potential implications of change on one's spiritual journey—and simultaneously as researcher—offering an attentive ear alongside anonymity in a fluctuating scenario—most likely contributed to making the transformations on site a dominant theme during my research. Whereas some *sādhaka*s merely vented their frustrations regarding the transformations, others maintained some of the esoteric elements during ritual practices when the circumstances would allow so or in private settings. Several long-term practitioners have severely reduced or completely cut ties with Śaktipur so as to uphold Gurujī's teachings in their transgressive form.

In terms of the practice, certainly one of the most evident changes—and most upsetting[27] to *sādhaka*s favouring the ritual in its esoteric form—is the shift from receiving *kalāvāhana* 'sky-clad' (nude) to receiving it dressed. While until a few years ago (as I witnessed during one of my earlier visits) the receivers usually sat naked on Devī's *yoni* in Kāmākhyā, nowadays men are given a white *dhotī* (lower garment for men) and women a red tunic to receive the ritual (at times they bring their own spare clothes).

Another important point of dispute is the lack of significance currently attributed to the sex of ritual performers. Earlier, it was ensured that a person of the opposite sex to that of the receiver performed the ritual, unless the receiver was homosexual. As Kumar, a longstanding disciple of Gurujī, explains, 'when we touch our own body, we don't feel anything special. When a person of the opposite gender touches our body, without our knowledge, we feel an energy or current pass inside us ... the main thing is that this energy should rise ... for that to happen, if one prefers it done by the same sex, it should be allowed'. From a conversation with Rajesh, one of the senior ritual specialists, it becomes further clear how the performer's gender, and its reception by the receiver, are crucial for the efficacy of *kalāvāhana*:

> with this *pūjā*, we make the mood of Mā (Mother) happy. At that time, we can ask her for things. This is *kaulācāra*, this is what Gurujī taught us ... In *kalāvāhana* if a woman touches [another woman], there are no feelings, the energy will not pick up. But if a gent touches [a woman], then [her] feelings will be better. If with a gent's touch [a woman is] not feeling better, then [she] stop[s] the *pūjā*. But if in the *pūjā* [she] is happy with a gent's touch, then it is okay, then it is correct. If a lady touches [a lady], then the *pūjā* works fifty percent. If [one] touches [oneself], then its efficacy is twenty-five percent ... there will be small results ... But if it is gent and lady, then *pakka* [surely] it will be hundred percent efficacious! But the feeling must be good, both sides must be happy.

As appears from these conversations, *kalāvāhana* used to revolve chiefly around pleasure and sexuality, in accordance with Devī's main attributes as erotic and fertile mother. Among other things, the centrality of pleasure is recalled in Devī's main anthropomorphic representation as Tripurasundarī who, sitting naked on top of a recumbent Śiva, my informants specify, is 'enjoying the union'. As such, when observed within the larger scope of *kaulācāra* worship—favoured by a majority of Gurujī's early followers—*kalāvāhana* used to constitute a basis from where, if *sādhaka*s were so inclined, they could progress into more distinctly erotic worship culminating in various forms of *maithuna*. While there are various methods to worship Devī, Pavan, another of Gurujī's senior disciples, clarifies that 'this [*kaulācāra*] is a very powerful and fast way'. Elaborating on *kalāvāhana* he outlines that, differently from the West, in this tradition sex is neither 'only for procreation, like

27. As I illustrate in the next part, this and other transformations impact the efficacy that the ritual holds for *sādhaka*s, causing them considerable distress.

in animals', nor 'just…for bodily pleasure', but for spiritual growth. In fact, through extended intercourse,[28] always strictly accompanied by *mantra*s, it is possible to harness the orgasmic energy and 'reach somewhere very high':

> You don't see the person in front of you, but you realise you are with Śiva or Śakti … when you elevate the orgasm from this body … think of the *amṛta*, the juice in the top of the head … in the middle of the two feet of Śakti and Śiva.[29] What do you think that is? This is the sexual fluid, their orgasm … For me it is okay to have these [spiritual] sexual feelings for another woman [different from my wife] … My wife, the wife for a man is his guide, and his chief commander in a way, you have to do everything for her. That is the society. There is a difference between society and the spiritual path … The naked *kalāvāhana* is also something where you should overcome your mental block in order to benefit from it, or else you will concentrate only on your erection and on how to overcome it.

While *kalāvāhana* is not *maithuna*, and does not necessarily flow into it, sexuality and pleasure crucially concern the ritual. For *sādhaka*s like Pavan, for whom *kalāvāhana* is a potential gateway to divine erotic practices, sexuality and pleasure are decisive for spiritual growth; conversely, the absence of erotic qualities in view of the ritual's erotic increasing assimilation into more conventional practices, can determine *kalāvāhana*'s (in)capacity to retain efficacy. What emerges particularly from Pavan's recount, is the spiritual character of pleasure, exempted from shame and guilt, and its demarcation from a Western heteronormative pursuit largely aimed at procreation or confined to being an end in itself.

Consistently with the *kaulācāra* understanding of pleasure, when pleasure manifests as female and male sexual fluids, these are offered to Devī at the end of the ritual. Rajesh explains that man 'can release semen, but it is not for procreation…this type of union is not sex, it is called *maithuna*. Let us not call it sex, since with sex we understand something else … this is not for children … this is to make Śakti and Śiva happy, and to gain power'. As the *sādhaka* Gitanjali observes, 'some people do not even touch god after they have sex until they have a bath, but in Śrīvidyā that [sexual fluids] becomes *naivedya* [ritually offered food] for the gods'.

Significantly, as senior *sādhaka*s repeatedly stress, the esoteric elements of their *sādhanā*s are not only paramount for their own pursuits, but also for the happiness and satisfaction of Devī. Upon one of his visits to the temple Shankarjī, a respected Śrīvidyā guru, well-acquainted with Gurujī yet from another lineage, expressed his concern when I asked him about the ritual transformations, declaring that 'Devī needs those rituals!' The words of

28. While according to Pavan *maithuna* should last at least forty-five to fifty minutes, more commonly my informants suggest a duration of four to five hours.
29. As seen in the description of *kalāvāhana* above, Śakti and Śiva reside in the left and right side of the head respectively, from where through their union they produce *amṛta*.

Sanjushree, another of Gurujī's early disciples, echo a similar feeling when I ask whether Devī now feels sad:

> Definitely yes, because she needs other *pūjā*s to happen, not just *kalāvāhana* as it is done today ... She likes *pūjā*s involving [woman] and [man]. Perhaps because of the energy back then [before the rituals were sanitized], there was a vibration in the nerves when one entered Kāmākhyā ... we all feel very bad about [the situation now]. Now, [the past] has just become a secret that everyone knows yet doesn't talk about. There is definitely a decrease in the energy of the Goddess.

A significant discrepancy emerges in conversations with disciples embracing *kaulācāra* and those favouring more conventional practices: while the former expand on *kalāvāhana*'s and other rituals' transgressive aspects, the latter tend to avoid discussing esoteric elements and disproportionately minimize their prior occurrence.[30]

While exchanges on *maithuna* with *sādhaka*s inclined toward *dakṣiṇācāra* have been unworkable, a juxtaposition between their assessment of nudity in *kalāvāhana* and that of practitioners who embrace transgressive elements proves insightful. When I ask Priya, a disciple veering toward conventional practices, whether *kalāvāhana* was more powerful nude and when performed by a person of the opposite sex, she points out that 'it depends from person to person ... people might take it in a negative way if you are without clothes. It depends, you should have belief. First of all, belief should be there ... it all depends on the belief in Amma (Devī). That's it. Everyone should believe that. If you believe in her, then there would be no difference in who does *kalāvāhana*'. Similarly, with regard to the transformations in *kalāvāhana*, an elderly married couple of senior disciples simply observes that 'they are minor changes'. Concerning the sensuality and voluptuousness of the Khaḍgamālās,[31] the husband, Mr Anand, explains: 'when I look at my mother and drink milk from her breasts, I don't get any bad ideas [sexual feelings]. In a way, those idols stand as a test to our own thinking. Similarly, if we look at anybody with a mature mind-set, we don't get any bad ideas. That is why Gurujī has put them that way'.

Discussions with *sādhaka*s who embrace esoteric practices lead to much more elaborate explanations. Lavanya, for example, declares that *kalāvāhana*

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30. While this silencing has to be understood as an interested act in view of the attempt to reframe the tradition so that it can be part of mainstream Śāktism, to a certain extent it can also be explained as a consequence of Gurujī's selective teaching. Moreover, according to one practitioner, 'the people now ... they don't really know. They were not there [during Gurujī's time] ... so they have learnt something here and there, but not the full thing ... What they do, their method, will ultimately bring results, but [only] after many years. If they knew the whole thing profoundly, they would not change [the rituals], they would not close everything'.

31. It is common in Śaktipur for the goddesses of the invocational *mantra Khaḍgamālāstotra* to be referred to as Khaḍgamālās. They adorn, as sensual idols, the main temple in Śaktipur.

was better 'earlier, without clothes!' because 'the energy was different'. The
priestess corroborates this by touching my naked arm with her hand and
exclaiming 'this is direct'; immediately thereafter, she touches me with her
hand on my *patiala salwar* (women's trousers): 'this is not direct! Is it different
for you?' Lavanya continues, 'in the hands we have a special energy', before
pinching me in my naked arm and observing 'you don't rub your arm where
I pinched you against your chin, your leg, or your other arm. Instead, you
take your other hand and rub it onto the area. Why? ... In the hands there is
a special energy, a special *śakti*, and it is healing'. Also Aparnamma asserts
that 'there is a very big difference' in performing the ritual naked or clothed;
'with nudity, this is how it should be done, but nudity has no longer a place
here'. She continues 'I have done [rituals] naked as long as I could ... but you
know, now they no longer allow it. Of course all these things should be done
naked!' The way things stand now, Aparnamma suggests, '[Devī] is not happy.
She is not happy at all. You can tell this, from different things ... she is sup-
posed to be naked.' With pragmatic attitude, disciple Himani wonders: 'you
wouldn't like to take a bath with your clothes on, no? So, to purify yourself
[your *cakra*s] also, it is better [to be naked]'. Like Lavanya, she supports this
by touching me once directly on my skin and once on my clothes, and observ-
ing 'if I touch you here [on my naked skin] this is more real'. Himani also
elaborates that 'if erotic sensations arise, you should ... change [them] into
divine qualities ... you have to channel them. When you are doing these *pūjā*s,
identifying yourself with Devī, sometimes automatically you get aroused: the
Kuṇḍalinī *śakti*[32] is awakened'.

   Although the change from nude to dressed *kalāvāhana* has led to various
disputes at the temple that are too evident to dismiss, the information vol-
unteered by disciples inclined toward conventional practices remains scant
when compared to that offered by practitioners welcoming esoteric aspects.

   To conclude this section, I briefly illustrate how Kāmākhyā, the venue
most closely associated with *kalāvāhana*, has over the years also undergone
substantial transformations that complement the ritual changes (Fig. 6). The
most noticeable change is undoubtedly the relocation of a striking *liṅga* of
approximately sixty centimetres, which used to emerge from the *yoni*, to a
different shrine. Nowadays, in place of the erstwhile *liṅga*, a modest rounded
elevation surmounts the *yoni*. While anatomically resembling a clitoris, it is
still firmly identified as *liṅga*, albeit part and parcel of the *yoni*. Aparnamma
reveals that 'here in Kāmākhyā ... [there] is only the genital part of the
Mother ... however, the clitoris is coming up in Śiva's form, as *śivaliṅga*...it is
part of the Mother. It is totally and entirely the vagina of the Mother. It is no
male, nothing'.[33] While the removal of the former *liṅga* occurred prior to my

32. Kuṇḍalinī is Devī as serpent energy, lying dormant at the bottom of the spinal column, in
    Mūlādhāra. When aroused, she ascends along the *cakra*s, opening them.

33. In my thesis I elaborate on the *yoni* as ultimate origin of everything existing—including the
    liṅga—and its cosmological and philosophical implications. For the purpose of this article,

Figure 6: Kāmākhyā. Photograph by author.

association with the temple, several informants attribute its replacement to the fact that 'people just couldn't take it'.

Another alteration, which took place even earlier, since fewer disciples can testify to it, seems to be the removal of erotic depictions ('sex photos from the *Kāmasūtra*') from the walls of Kāmākhyā. More recently, the image of a naked female body with legs apart, genitalia well visible, and a head of a thousand-petalled lotus, Lajjāgaurī, has been removed (Fig. 7). While during my early visits to the temple the frame met the eye immediately upon entering the shrine—as the only image adorning the walls together with one of Gurujī and one of *paraṃparaguru* (Gurujī's guru)—today it is hidden behind a curtain, visible only to women who change into the red robe prior to *kalāvāhana*,[34] and to ritual specialists.

A similar rejection of nudity unfolds with regard to Devī in her form as Amṛtākarṣiṇī (one who attracts with nectar), sitting about one metre tall at one end of the *yoni* holding a vessel with *amṛta* (Fig. 6): while Amṛtākarṣiṇī has customarily been naked, with her breasts and genitalia clearly discernible, since the Navarātri (Devī's yearly Nine Nights festival in autumn) that fell during my fieldwork in 2017, she has been donning a *sārī*. One evening

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suffice it to notice that, just as the underlying nature of men and women is Devī, so is the feminine also substratum of both male and female sexual organs.

34. Men usually change into the *dhotī* behind a wall just outside the shrine.

Figure 7: Lajjāgaurī. Photograph by author.

in late November, as I accompanied Aparnamma to change Amṛtākarṣiṇī's dress,[35] I inquired about this new protocol: instead of answering me, the

35. Clothing of dressed idols is regularly changed and offered as *prasād* to devotees on special occasions (such as weddings). Initially I expected Amṛtākarṣiṇī to return naked after the festival, when the number of occasional visitors, mostly not accustomed to sensual idols, falls. However, this was not the case.

priestess turned to Amṛtākarṣiṇī and confided to her: 'I like it better when we don't dress you, but then you decide. We will dress you until the day you take all your clothes off.' Lovingly caressing her cheeks and chin, Aparnamma continued 'I understand that [you are] very pretty with a beautiful *sārī* on. Everybody is beautiful with a nice *sārī* on. But they don't know that you look even more beautiful without anything on you!'

Regimes of Truth and Modes of Being as Conditions for Ritual Efficacy

Albeit falling on a spectrum, responses to *kalāvāhana*'s transformations roughly tend toward one of two stances: *sādhaka*s who favour a rather conventional approach accept the discontinuity represented by the ritual's sanitisation; *sādhaka*s prone to esoteric practices advocate continuity by preserving *kalāvāhana*'s transgressive elements. Importantly, for the former group, change does not hinder the ritual's efficacy (as exemplified by Vritti: 'the ritual is still efficacious, you need to concentrate on the Goddess'); for the latter group, instead, the exclusion of non-conventional elements not only affects the ritual's efficacy (according to Lavanya 'without proper touch, how can the ritual still be efficacious?') but also Devī's satisfaction (as Shankarjī exclaims: 'Devī needs those rituals! How can she be happy without?'). Practitioners for whom ritual efficacy is compromised often resort to transgressions of various degrees or, in extreme cases, stop frequenting the temple and establish new *pīṭha*s where they can maintain the tradition in its *kaulācāra* traits.[36]

So far, the negotiation between ritual continuity and discontinuity in Tantra has mostly been understood in relation to historico-political events such as the arrival of Islam in Kashmir (Padoux 2017; Lorenzen 2002) or the colonial invasion of the Subcontinent (Gray 2016). Following suit, it would be attractive to attribute the changes shaping Śaktipur to a number of external and internal socio-political events. Indeed, the ritual specialists themselves occasionally mention occurrences such as visits by the police to control what *pūjā*s are performed (Lavanya), the potential repercussions of decontextualized and widely circulated selfies (Geeta) and the possible doubts arising in visitors upon seeing Kāmākhyā's door closed for the performance of esoteric rituals (Geeta). Additionally, even though not directly referred to by the *sādhaka*s, other socio-political events are likely to have an impact on the viability of the tradition's esotericism, such as the temple's efforts to attract followers from an ever-wider Hindu base, and its association with Samarasata Sewa Foundation, engaged in spreading a predominantly mainstream Hindu way of life.

36. The difficulty of such a decision becomes clear when considering that these *sādhaka*s are cutting ties with a particularly powerful site, since Kāmākhyā is *svayambhū*, self-manifested.

While such circumstances certainly influence the refashioning of Tantric traditions, I maintain that recourse to a primarily historico-socio-political lens misses the fundamental motives underlying the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity. The reasons mentioned above are essentially symptomatic of deeper epistemic-ontological predispositions that foster and legitimize ritual transformations. It is thus useful to adopt an archaeologico-genealogical approach that highlights the *regimes of truth* and *modes of being* underpinning negotiations between conventional and esoteric practices. Only by looking at such existential coordinates, is it possible to address not only the conspicuous discrepancy in *sādhaka*s' responses to change and ritual efficacy, but also the significant risks practitioners incur to uphold transgressive elements. My endeavour is thus to answer the questions: Which regimes of truth and modes of being allow or prevent the maintenance of ritual efficacy? Which ontological formations underpin Devī's satisfaction or dissatisfaction?

Embodied and Representational Modes of Being

From the data shown above (pp. XXX), two distinct modes of being emerge, each legitimized by—and in turn normalizing—a correlated regime of truth: a representational and an embodied mode of being.[37] The former is understood as an ontological condition largely governed by a framework filtering existence in dualistic terms, establishing distinct selves and others, minds and bodies, and subjects and objects. The latter existential mode is informed by immanency, non-mediation and oneness, pre-empting the assumption of ontological duality. Most notably, a paradigm of embodiment has been outlined by Thomas Csordas (1990, 1995). Building on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approach, Csordas suggests that the representational mode of being, and its characteristic mind–body division, is the product of a primal process of reflexivity and self-objectification, which makes the concept of the body viable in the first place; conversely, an embodied mode of being occurs in a pre-objectified setup eluding abstraction, thus presenting a synthesis between body, knowledge and experience, and displaying bodies as irreducible, necessary grounds of existence.

Importantly, Csordas points out that processes of objectification and representation are not necessary but contingent phenomena; therefore, dualities such as mind–body, self–other, subject–object and thought–experience have to be understood as arbitrary, and 'otherness [as] a characteristic of

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37. Of course practitioners—and subjects at large—do not conform to either of these modes in their entirety, but fluctuate between them, adopting an embodied mode in some respects and a representational mode in others. To insist on a stark dichotomy would be inaccurate and encourage a problematic exoticisation. Inden (1990) and LiPuma (1998) exemplify the usefulness of thinking in terms of spectra (with regard to imagination and rationality, and collectivity and individuality respectively) as opposed to strict dichotomies.

human consciousness rather than an objective reality' (Csordas 1990: 34). It follows that an exploration of the relationship between representational and embodied modes of being cannot limit itself to analysing the categories deriving from processes of differentiation, but has to observe the very *processes* enabling objectification in the first place. When starting from a pre-objective experience of the body, it not only emerges that the process of differentiation between mind and body is cultural, but also that 'our own bodies are not objects to us. Quite the contrary, they are an integral part of the perceiving subject' (ibid.: 36).[38] Csordas notes that 'Merleau-Ponty (1962) sees at the root of speech a verbal gesture with immanent meaning, as against a notion of speech as a representation of thought ... we possess words in terms of their articulatory and acoustic style as one of the possible uses of our bodies. Speech does not express or represent thought ... [i]nstead, speech is an act or phonetic gesture in which one takes up an existential position in the world' (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 25).

When applying these observations about speech, and the underlying embodied and representational frameworks, to ritual action practised in Śaktipur, a similar distinction can be evinced. It appears that *sādhaka*s endorsing rituals centred around the body display primarily pre-objectified and embodied existential coordinates. This emerges chiefly in their emphasis on touch and physical pleasure. Lavanya and Himani's sensorial demonstrations with regard to the flow of energy through direct touch further underline the tendency toward a non-abstract, non-referential attitude. The predilection for a ritual performer who can sexually arouse the *kalāvāhana* receiver, as stressed by Kumar, Rajesh and Pavan, similarly affirms the importance of bodily sensations; likewise, Pavan's deliberation on *maithuna* asserts the importance of prolonged embodied pleasure. Moreover, pleasure, in its spiritual significance, is delinked from mediated, social expectations, and is appreciated essentially in its phenomenological manifestation as sexual fluids. Crucially, as Gitanjali and Rajesh mention, it is the act of *maithuna* and the ensuing embodied pleasure manifesting as sexual fluids, which make Devī rejoice upon receiving these. An analogous disregard for abstraction and representation transpires from Gitanjali's perception of *mantra*s: when I ask whether *pūjā*s are deprived of efficacy if someone performs them without knowing the significance of the accompanying *mantra*s, Gitanjali assures me that 'there will definitely be an effect even if one is doing it for the first time [without prior experience]'.

Only through a process of self-reflexivity and abstraction can the body become an object subjected to contemplative reflection and, as such, prone to a narrative of sin and shame. Similarly, it is only through the corresponding

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38. Further reflections on different models of the body, and on representational and embodied bodies are offered by Leder (1992a, 1992b).

reification of the mind, that the abstract concept of belief can emerge and, eventually, take precedence over sensory experiences. Such tendencies are clearly displayed in the attitudes of *sādhakas* proposing conventional rituals either directed at idols or unfolding primarily in the mind and expressed through belief. Thus, a regulating discourse of sin informs the recount of Mr Anand, who divests the Khadgamālās' eroticism of any kind of spiritual and pleasurable function, construing it instead as a temptation to test one's chastity. Shame is an undercurrent informing Geeta's fear of the circulation of potentially compromising selfies, as well as the restrictions on Aparnamma's attempts to maintain *kalāvāhana*'s nudity. Generally, shame and the potential for sin underwrite the code of silence largely adopted by conventionally-inclined practitioners with regard to embodied pleasure and sexuality. Erotic pleasure, one of Devī's primary features, is thus recast in abstract and intellectual terms: from phenomenological expression as sexual fluids, it becomes contemplative object in meticulously-executed idol-worship and meditative practices. Priya's insistence on belief as the overarching component determining ritual efficacy, independently of the corporeal sensations possibly arising from performers of the opposite sex, nudity and touch, further corroborates the prevalence of a representational and symbolic propensity to worship, where the body is subdued to the intellect and effectively dismissed.

Conditions for Ritual Efficacy and Devī's Satisfaction

When taking into account the two modes of being outlined above, and their respective regimes of truth (pre-objective and dichotomous) it is possible to provide answers to the questions presented earlier: According to which ontological preconditions is a sanitized ritual corpus efficacious or not for *sādhakas*? Under which existential conditions is Devī satisfied or dissatisfied with transformed rituals?

With regard to efficacy, it becomes evident that rituals informed by an objectified, dichotomous discourse that concedes notions of shame and abstraction, are structurally incompatible with modes of being that present a pre-reflexive disposition and, as such, unfold primarily in corporeal experience. Rituals that presume a mind–body and, by extension, a self–other distinction, can be legitimized and endowed with efficacy only by practitioners who share similar ontological structures.

Vice versa, rituals that build on an underlying oneness, and demand embodied, non-representational practices evading narratives of shame, might prove distasteful to *sādhakas* whose mode of being is governed by a dichotomous setup that, on the one hand, regulates the body through notions of propriety (especially concerning nudity and sexuality) and, on the other, relocates meaning to abstract levels through symbolic action. Embodied

rituals are instead legitimate and efficacious for practitioners who subscribe to a non-representational and sensory regime of truth.[39]

The possibilities of satisfying Devī and making her happy are also intimately connected with the practitioners' regimes of truth. As Csordas observes:

> If we do not perceive our own bodies as objects, neither do we perceive others as objects. Another person is perceived as another 'myself,' tearing itself away from being simply a phenomenon in my perceptual field ... As is true of the body, other persons can become objects for us only secondarily, as the result of reflection.
>
> (Csordas 1990: 37)[40]

It follows that in a pre-objectified framework, worshipping Devī as an idol or offering her abstract pleasure in symbolic form—as opposed to experientially worshipping and pleasing her through one's body—lacks the ontological conditions for efficacy. According to the embodied mode of being, Csordas notices, '[t]he locus of the sacred is the body, for the body is the existential ground of culture' (ibid.: 39). Devī can, however, be effectively pleased through external worship in an ontological setup that differentiates between self and other, and allows for transferable, symbolic action.

The two different modes of worship reflect also the aims of *kalāvāhana* and Śrīvidyā in general. As mentioned above (p. XXX), Śrīvidyā rituals can be performed in order to influence the mundane world, something that can be achieved either by obtaining Devī's boons, or by directly accessing and participating in her power. The trading of ritual performances with Devī's boons presumes and sustains a dualistic exchange framework between a self (practitioner) and an other (Devī). Conversely, directly accessing and participating in Devī's power is possible only where duality does not undermine a ubiquitous perception of sameness between Devī and practitioners, nor foster a differentiation between bodily experience and mental contemplation.

When looking at the regimes of truth underpinning different modes of ritual execution, it is possible to understand how conditions for ritual efficacy and Devī's happiness diverge, as do the aims pursued through Śrīvidyā. Expanding on this divergence, which is reflected in the propensity for either *kaulācāra* or *dakṣiṇācāra* practices and in the distinction between

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39. From the malleability of devotees' practices and the degree of ontological fluidity observed above, it follows that ritual efficacy is not completely foreclosed when practice and a *sādhaka*'s regime of truth are discordant. Here I evidence the two extremes for the clarity of the argument.

40. Devī is clearly endowed with personhood, as is evidenced from her anthropomorphic form and her behavioural traits. On conferring personhood to non-human beings, see for example various essays in Ingold's collection (2000).

advaita (non-duality) and *dvaita* (duality) traditions,[41] it becomes evident that *kalāvāhana*, as officially practised today, is animated by an underlying contradiction.

While the ritual is aimed at establishing bodily identity with Devī, corporeal sensations are increasingly abstracted and transferred to the mind. Subscribing neither entirely to a pre-objective or a dichotomous regime of truth, questions arise as to how, and for how long, *kalāvāhana*'s execution can remain legitimized. Since *kalāvāhana* encapsulates much of Gurujī's legacy—Devī having directly transmitted it to him and it being one of his favourite rituals—it contributes fundamentally to Śaktipur's identity and serves as its unique trademark. However, as sustained expansion efforts of the last couple of years—considerably leveraged on *kalāvāhana*—bear fruit, a wider followership makes the temple increasingly accountable to mainstream sensibilities, in addition to the differing predilections of established *sādhaka*s.

Being a crucial point of contention, *kalāvāhana* requires careful and continuous negotiation and reinvention; at the same time, precisely because of its nature as neither fully embodied nor fully representational practice, it leaves scope for politics of inclusion and exclusion. Similarly to Brooks's findings, it permits *dakṣiṇācāra*-oriented 'Śrīvidyā practitioners to assert their difference from (and implicit superiority over) other [mainstream *śākta* practitioners] while affirming the view that nothing they do is [anti-mainstream]' (Brooks 1992: 414). In view of its strategic role on a multiplicity of levels, *kalāvāhana* will thus most likely be preserved and remain relevant, despite challenging the increasingly predominant representational regime of truth, and relentlessly foster the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity, so emblematic of Tantric and esoteric traditions in general.

CONCLUSIONS

Through the analysis of *kalāvāhana*, a ritual celebrating oneness with Devī unique to Gurujī's disciples, I have traced the dynamics of continuity and discontinuity animating a contemporary South Indian Śrīvidyā tradition at large. In recent years, the tradition's official canon has gradually discontinued some of the more esoteric elements of practices centred on the body, rendering the canon amenable to being incorporated within mainstream Śāktism.

While a number of historico-socio-political factors are unquestionably correlated with the on-going sanitization process, through a firmly praxis-oriented approach it becomes evident that such circumstances cannot

41. While the concepts of *advaita* and *dvaita* certainly warrant a more detailed discussion (Törzsök 2014), here I refer to them as my informants do, distinguishing between practices on persons and practices on idols.

satisfactorily answer questions about the profound motives that not only induce such transformations but also, importantly, legitimize and eventually normalize them. Despite incurring considerable risks, a number of *sādhaka*s engage in subversive actions, ranging from subtle transgressions such as preserving esoteric elements, to abandoning the temple complex and establishing new *pīṭha*s where the tradition can be continued with its *kaulācāra* traits. Underlying these *sādhaka*s' infractions is the loss of ritual efficacy that for them accompanies the neglect of unconventional elements, especially embodied pleasure. Moreover, Devī, they maintain, cannot be happy if her eroticism is devalued or if she is denied physical pleasure through *sādhaka*s' bodies. Conversely, a number of practitioners readily embrace the transformed canon since, for them, neither ritual efficacy nor Devī's satisfaction are compromised by it.

The ritual change's contrasting implications for efficacy and Devī's satisfaction demand that, in addition to historico-socio-political motives, questions about the legitimation of change be explored also. Through a Foucauldian archaeologico-genealogical methodology—inquiring which regimes of truth and modes of being inform and sustain change—it emerges that, while *kaulācāra*-oriented practitioners subscribe to embodied ontological conditions corresponding to a pre-objective regime of truth, *sādhaka*s favouring *dakṣiṇācāra* practices present representational modes of being supported by a dichotomous worldview. Whereas dynamics of continuity and discontinuity at first appear to be exclusively governed by historical circumstances, upon further inspection, it becomes evident that they are ultimately the result of collisions between differing worldviews and existential coordinates.

Since from this study it emerges that diverging ontological foundations present different conditions of ritual efficacy, both for practitioners and for Devī, when extending these observations to the larger landscape of Śrīvidyā, it needs to be asked what changes in the practitioners' and Devī's metaphysical and existential domains accompanied ritual transformations—such as those observed by White (1998) and Brooks (1992)—in order for the ritual corpus to remain legitimate.

EPILOGUE

I illustrate the delicate negotiations between secrecy and openness in Śaktipur only after considering extensively and carefully the potential implications of their publication. Being an anthropologist, my first and foremost concern is with my informants, not only in terms of their safety by ensuring anonymity, but also in terms of doing justice to the worldviews and modes of being they so generously made me part of. As someone profoundly engaged with the community, personally and academically, witnessing and becoming

inevitably involved in politics of secrecy has raised a number of ethical dilemmas. Whether to disclose information, and how much, has always been firstly a matter of principle, and secondarily one of academic interest. Given my informants' diverging worldviews and modes of being, their relationship to secrecy not only varies, but is informed by different, often contrasting, interests. I am aware that by presenting the negotiation between continuity and discontinuity I make myself vulnerable to the criticism of some of the temple's main decision-makers. On the other hand, concealing these negotiations would not only have been scholarly inaccurate but, importantly, would not have been in the best interests of practitioners whose regimes of truth are already dismissed.

Ultimately, however, I remain committed to Gurujī's desire to be open about Śrīvidyā, something he requested his disciples upon initiation. Devī, he assured them, would safeguard the information from ill-intentioned people. Obviously, however, I have maintained the anonymity of my teachers, friends and informants by changing their names and omitting information that could lead to their recognition. Similarly, I only disclose selected information about rituals, and I use a pseudonym for the temple complex. I am aware that nevertheless some readers may be able to identify the temple complex; it is my hope that these readers will treat this information with best ethical intentions.

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